Public Islam in the Contemporary World: A View on the American Case

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Abstract

The article reviews the status of the highly diverse community of American Muslims, with reference to US national identity and immigration history, history of Islam in the USA, and civil society organization. It is found that on average, and after the civil right movement of the 1960s, Muslims are very well assimilated into the US society and economy, in which the specific American civil society and religious organizations play an important enabling part, providing networks and inroads to society for newcomers as well as vehicles for preserving ethnic-cultural distinctiveness. This broad pattern of development has not changed in the aftermath of 9/11 and ensuing wars on terror. Compared with the Nordic context, where Muslims are often considered challenging to a secular social order, American Muslims do not stand out as more or differently religious, or any less American, than other religious communities. It is tentatively concluded that, downsides apart, US national identity and civil society structure could be more favorable for the social integration of Muslims than the Nordic welfare state model.

Thinking about Islam in the Nordic world, particularly in comparison with the United States, brings into relief long-standing issues in understanding religion in the modern world. On the one hand, there is the venerable theoretical framework generally called 'secularization theory' that posits that industrialization produces a 'modern' society in which religion recedes into the private or personal sphere (if it continues to exist at all)

and in which the public becomes secular. The Scandinavian countries in many ways are the paradigmatic example of that theoretical expectation, as state churches have become largely irrelevant to politics and play a mostly ceremonial role in public life, and many if not most people live happily and well with little formal religious involvement.

On the other hand, the United States has always been a statistical outlier in secularization theory, with continuing high rates of religious belief, attendance, and public impact, combined with significant economic development. While the institutional 'separation of church and state' is written into the U.S. Constitution, religion matters in American politics, it shapes many aspects of American culture, and it is a vital part American civil society—including a central role in social welfare provision.

Another deep assumption in much sociological theorizing posits that religion is integral to, and may be necessary for, social cohesion.[1] From this perspective, religious diversity undermines the feelings of solidarity and the shared values and norms that enable smooth social functioning and collective identity. Again, the Nordic countries and the U.S.A. provide a contrast. The former are generally thought to be characterized by a high degree of collective identity and social solidarity, while the U.S.A. is socially diverse, with marked strains of cultural individualism. Moreover, the U.S.A. has been a vibrant empirical example of religious pluralism, as it may now be the most religiously diverse country in the world.

It should be noted that secularization theory may not be quite so 'wrong' concerning the U.S. case, as there is evidence that church attendance reports are inflated and religious groups significantly accommodate secular culture (e.g., Hadaway, et al 1993; Demerath and Williams 1992; C. Smith 2003). Further, religious diversity in the U.S.A. may not be a true religious 'pluralism'—that is, the social fact of diversity is well beyond the cultural value that celebrates such differences; indeed, many Americans see religious diversity as a threat to their society.

[1] The classic statement of this perspective is found in Emile Durkheim's (1912/1995), but it has appeared in many forms by many different authors; see, for example, Peter L. Berger (1967).

Whatever one holds about the general trajectory of religion, the visible role of Islam in world affairs in the past few decades—from the revolution in Iran, to the repelling of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, to the attacks of 9/11, to the recent 'Arab Spring'—seems to be the paradigmatic case of Casanova's (1994) 'de-privatization' of religion. As Juergensmeyer (1993) noted, the secular nationalism and liberal nation-state that were central to modernization theory failed people in much of the global semi-periphery, whatever the success in the developed North and West. In many Islamic societies these political and economic failures clearly set the stage for the type of 'religious nationalism' that many Islamist movements advocate. And many Western societies, including the U.S.A. and the Nordic nations, are experiencing, and often struggling with, a fairly recent influx of Muslim immigrants. Thus, the role of religion in contemporary society has attained renewed urgency, and much of it centres on Islam and the West.

This essay will make the argument that the situation of Islam in the U.S.A. must be understood within the context of a society particularly accommodating towards religious diversity. Due to its history of immigration, a culture of individualism, and a structure of civil society that is open to minority group initiatives, the U.S.A. has the resources to accommodate new populations successfully. One result is that some of the challenges facing Nordic societies as they deal with current Muslim immigrants are less pressing in the U.S.A., and at the least, American society will respond to them differently. Through a review of the history of immigration and religious diversity in the U.S.A., and Islam's developing place in it, I argue that far from this being an exceptional historical moment, the current challenges fit within a longer national story that has usually ended 'successfully'. Several institutional, legal, and cultural features of the U.S.A. have produced the combination of high religious involvement along with economic development (see also Warner 2008). That religious involvement, particularly among immigrants and religious minorities, is about much more than belief in the divine. Religious organizations do significant sociological work and—intentionally or not—are important players in the process of immigrant incorporation.

Islam in U.S. History

In some ways, the story of Islam in the U.S.A. is an old story in that there have been small numbers of Muslims in North America for many years. For example, there have been Muslims in the Chicago area since the 1893 Columbian Exposition, for which a small number of Muslims from around the world travelled for the Midway's exhibits.[2] More significantly, beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, groups of Muslims emerged in the U.S.A. within African-American communities in several cities (an undetermined number of African slaves brought to the Americas were Muslim as well). The most significant of these communities eventually developed into the Nation of Islam, now headquartered in Chicago, but other Islamic sectarian groups and communities developed in New York, Detroit, and other major cities (see J. Smith 2010; McCloud 2003).

These communities, while significant in terms of their place in African-American history, and being wonderful examples of the innovative and syncretic character of American religion, did not force many Americans to deal with Islam as a public religion, that is, as a major part of the American religious mosaic that would need to be encountered in public life. The political, economic, and social isolation of African Americans in residential ghettos and working-class jobs—during a period of both *de jure* and *de facto* racial apartheid—kept African-American Islam from making much of an impact on the wider American society until relatively recently. Whatever its contributions to Black America, African-American Islam did not make much of an impression on the white majority. Thus, it is reasonable to understand the *public* issues connected to Islam in the U.S.A. as being a development of the post-1965 era of immigration, and its attendant concerns with diversity, pluralism, and post-9/11 national security.

[2] See Schmidt (2004). The 'Midway' was the part of the Exposition's grounds that featured cultural nad social displays of peoples from many different parts of the world. It was a key reason the Exposition was often referred to as the 'World's Fair.'

Immigration to the United States

From the early 1920s until 1965, U.S. immigration policy was a national quota system. A designated number of immigrants were granted admission to the country each year; the quota number was based on a percentage (2%) of the number of persons of that nationality already present in the U.S. population (Daniels 1990; Zolberg 2006). The quota system was designed to reproduce a population mostly descended from western and northern Europeans, and overwhelmingly Protestant Christian (with a significant minority of Roman Catholics). The policy developed in response to the fact that the immigrants arriving in the U.S.A. from the 1880s to 1920 were disproportionately from southern and eastern European countries (e.g., Italy, Greece, Poland, and Russia) and were Catholic and Jewish. These immigrants prompted nativist worries that the U.S.A. was losing its western European, Protestant character. Indeed, this nativist concern is shown clearly in that the first quota policy in 1920 pegged its quota numbers not to the U.S. population in that year, but to the numbers in the 1890 U.S. census—when the population had been even more western European and Protestant. Further, immigrants from East Asia were almost totally barred by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1909 'Gentleman's Agreement' with Japan; thus, the 1920–65 period saw very small numbers of Asian immigrants (many of them Japanese and Korean 'war brides' of American military personnel). It should be noted, however, that a policy known as the *bracero* programme actually encouraged low-wage agricultural labour from Mexico (demonstrating the complicated ways in which U.S. immigration policy has been a mix of cultural, political, and economic concerns; Zolberg 2006:245).

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act changed the quota system by raising the total number of immigrants allowed in, and altered the quotas from being based on individual nations to a division between the eastern and western global hemispheres. These changes produced two significant effects. Over the next decades the pace of immigration picked up, as more people were allowed in and those countries with more eager migrants were less restricted by national quotas. Second, the regions of origin for immigrants changed dramatically, and for the first time in national history the bulk of

immigration began to come from non-European countries, in particular countries in East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Ironically, while the 1965 Act did impose a quota on the Western Hemisphere, between economic pressures and relatively loose border security Mexicans now made up a significant portion of current immigrants.

Along with the post-1965 expansion of racial and ethnic diversity in new immigrant populations came religious diversity, and for the first time large numbers of Muslim, Hindus, and Buddhists began arriving in the U.S.A. (Wuthnow 2005). While the U.S.A. remains an overwhelmingly Christian country (estimates are about 75% of those identifying with a religion are at least nominally Christian), there were significant numbers of non-Christian, non-western religious people, and buildings, for the first time. Just as was the case with the arrival of substantial numbers of Catholics in the 1840s and '50s, and the very visible numbers of Jews in the 1890s–1910s, the large and visible numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have become for some a source of political and cultural concern—and at the same time a source of national pride at the American ability to absorb religious diversity (Wuthnow 2005:75-78).

Consistent with this history, most immigrant Muslims to the U.S.A. came after the 1965 legal and policy changes. As noted, there were small numbers of immigrant Muslims prior to then (many from Turkey or the Balkans), however, the rapid growth since the 1970s has led to a general distinction in American Islam between 'immigrant' and 'indigenous' (mostly meaning African American) Muslims; about 66–70% of current U.S. Muslims are either immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants (Leonard 2007). Most of these are either from the South Asian subcontinent (about one third of all U.S. Muslims) or the Arab world (slightly over one quarter). This means that the American Muslim community is highly diverse racially, culturally, and ethnically. In general, the Muslim community is fairly well educated and has significant numbers of

professionals, small business owners, and others in the middle class (Pew Research Center 2007).[3]

It should be noted that these figures on religious affiliation, diversity, and demographic characteristics are approximations. The provisions of the U.S. Constitution that separate church and state have been interpreted to mean that government-sponsored information gathering does not ask individuals about their religious affiliations, beliefs, or practices. Consequently, what is the best, most complete, dataset about the American people (the decennial census) does not include religion. Of course, religious organizations keep membership records, but the accuracy of those records, and the varying definitions used by different religious institutions as to who counts as a 'member', mean that those numbers are not particularly reliable.

The best efforts at counting the religious affiliations of individual Americans have come from social scientists—since 1972 in the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, and the more recent American Religious Identification Survey by the Leonard E Greenberg Center at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. These surveys estimate that approximately three-quarters of the U.S. population identify as 'Christian', about 14–16% express no religious affiliation, about 2–3% are Jewish, while Buddhism, Hinduism, and 'others' comprise 2.5–3%. These numbers mean that just about 1% of the American people consider themselves Muslim, at the time of writing about 3 million (Kosmin and Keysar 2009; Pew Research Center 2007). This number is politically controversial, with both those promoting Islam in the U.S.A., and those deeply concerned about the number of Muslims in the country, often using numbers in the range of 6 or 7 million. As Tom Smith of the National Opinion Research Center has shown (2001; 2002), for those latter numbers to be true, every reputable academic and scholarly survey would need to be off

[3] This education and occupation profile is partly explained by the preferences in American immigration policy toward admitting those with education and easily marketable job skills; see also, Pew Research Center (2007).

by a factor of two. The numbers are increasing fairly rapidly, but approximately 3 million is the best estimate from the best surveys now.

The Response to Muslim Immigration

Americans' attitudes about immigrants have varied over time; they also vary based on the specific immigrants in question. Some newcomers have always been more 'acceptable' than others; as Zolberg (2006:1) says, 'A nation of immigrants, to be sure, but not just any immigrants.' In a country founded by and overwhelmingly populated by northern and western European Protestants, the variation in acceptance has been embedded in racial and religious identities. Many of the fears about immigrants seem to revolve around similar themes—for example, the threat to national or cultural identity, or the economic threat of low-wage work—but these memes are applied to groups differentially, usually based on racial or religious 'otherness' (see Williams 2013).

This intersects, then, with other cultural and racial suspicions. While the presence of significant numbers of Muslim immigrants is a fairly recent development, scholars have noted a long history of suspicion of Muslims and Arabs manifested in American media, popular culture, and cultural stereotypes (Cainkar 2009:64-68). Building on these images in recent decades were tensions with Middle Eastern oil-producing states since the 1970s, the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, and the continuing loyalty to Israel felt by many Americans. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 all of these suspicions and assumptions were easily resurrected and often manifested in xenophobia, nativism, and political fears. Incidents of harassment and hate crimes against Muslims (and people perceived to be Muslim—for example, a Sikh man was shot to death in Arizona) increased and many Muslims reported an increased sense of being watched and being treated as less than fully 'American' (Peek 2010). Further, a general cultural wariness of Islam may be increasing in the U.S.A., according to Bail (2012).

Other incidents reveal the ways in which what may be generalized social and cultural anxiety have been recently focused on Muslims. For example, the state of Oklahoma adopted an amendment to the State Constitution in 2010 that would forbid its courts

from accommodating Islamic *Shar'ia* law (the amendment was struck down by a Federal appeal court in January 2012). This even though Oklahoma's population is less than 1% Muslim and no other religiously based legal system was mentioned in the amendment. In another high profile example, Terry Jones, leader of a conservative Christian centre in Florida, has on more than one occasion publicly burned copies of the Qur'an. And there have been public demonstrations against the building of mosques in places as diverse as New York City, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and Riverside County, California.

However, the backlash that might have been expected post-9/11 in many ways did not materialize. Without discounting the many examples of discrimination or harassment, or the extent to which Muslim Americans have experienced a sense of 'homeland insecurity' (Cainkar 2009), the American majority's response in the twenty-first century has been qualitatively different from the relocation camps in which Japanese-Americans were confined in World War II. And there has been nothing approaching the communal violence that has often marked inter-religion conflict in India, Nigeria, or the U.S.A. in the 1850s. Many Americans express suspicion of, or worry about, Muslims in the U.S.A.; many are willing to curtail Muslims' civil rights as a result (Wuthnow 2005). But many others do not share those concerns, or do not think that such concerns should result in severe curtailment of civil liberties, or discrimination, or anti-immigrant reform.

For many American Muslims, their commitment to the U.S.A. and to the lives they are building there was mostly unshaken in the last decade and has often intensified. Cainkar (2009) found that the sense of insecurity about being distrusted was accompanied by a simultaneous appreciation for life in the U.S.A. and a sense of being 'American'. The Pew Research Center (2007) subtitled a report on Muslim Americans 'Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream'. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2009) found that in many ways Muslims became more 'American' following 9/11.[4] The organizations that represent

[4] Echoing this theme, see also Bilici (2011) and Williams (2010).

the interests of Muslims in America, such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), became more active and professionalized after the attacks, and incorporated into their claims the very American themes of individual rights, civil liberties, and religious freedom. And fascinatingly, there is evidence that even while anti-Muslim messages may be more prevalent than before 9/11, attitudes towards Muslims and suspicion of Islam have not significantly affected native-born Americans' concerns about immigration. That is, while security issues have been and remain one argument for curtailing current rates of immigration into the country, those most concerned about immigration are often most concerned about unauthorized immigration, and that concern focuses on immigrants from Mexico and Latin America (Timberlake and Williams 2012).

Nonetheless, post-9/11 the U.S.A. has thrown a public light on Islam and produced a vibrant debate about its place in the American religious and social mosaic. During controversies over mosque building or *Shar'ia* law some Americans have loudly proclaimed that America is a 'Christian Nation' and thus Islam fundamentally does not belong (Williams 2011). On the other hand, consistent immigration by people of Islamic origins—often having education and skills needed by the U.S. economy, who have deep commitments to education and family, and in a context in which increasingly significant second and third generations are becoming comfortable in the U.S.A., have convinced many scholars that full incorporation of Islam into the U.S.A. is mostly a matter of time (Williams 2011).

American Incorporation of Immigrant Populations

There has been a lively debate among scholars about the ways in which immigrant populations are incorporated—or not—into American society. In the mid-twentieth century the dominant paradigm was one of 'assimilation'. The view was that the incorporation process developed more or less naturally through incorporation of new immigrants into the economy, the adoption of cultural values, and then integration into social networks (the classic statement is Gordon 1964). Given the historical period, it is not too surprising that this idea fitted the general trend of European groups that came to

the U.S.A. in the nineteenth century. Critics of this perspective argued that while it was applicable to certain European immigrants in particular historical circumstances, it was far from a universal process, even during the historical heyday of late nineteenth-century immigration. Criteria such as immigrants' skin colour, skills and human capital assets, and other cultural markers (such as language or religion) determined different trajectories for different groups. The accumulation of these critiques meant that for some time the term 'assimilation' was rarely used in sociological writing. The continued disadvantage of racial groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, and dark-skinned Latino/as seemed to undercut the 'America as a nation of immigrants' narrative.

The post-1965 immigrant groups have been as varied in circumstances as they are in national origin and religion, however. As a result, the blanket rejection of assimilationist ideas has also needed some re-thinking. Drawing on more recent analyses of newer and often middle-class immigrants, Portes and Zhou (1993) introduced the idea of 'segmented assimilation'. They noted that many immigrant communities, particularly those with a growing second generation, were prospering in the American economy and flocking to higher education—yet they were not becoming thoroughly assimilated in terms of cultural or social networks. Immigrant communities were maintaining religious, ethnic, and sometimes even linguistic continuity with their homelands, but were moving relatively smoothly into the host country's economy. This was true not just of small business owners who served the immigrant community itself, but the incorporation was also powered by engineers, professionals, computer programmers, and others in solidly middle-class niches. In sum, the assimilation was segmented—structurally and economically integrating while maintaining some cultural distinction. And it was segmented among different immigrant groups, some incorporating well and others staying quite apart. Tellingly, the vehicle for this cultural preservation is often religious organizations, especially for the first generation and often for their children.

Religion and the New Immigrants

Religion has been a key part of American culture and society since the early national period of the early nineteenth century. In a sparsely settled, largely agricultural society,

local religious congregations were the foremost organizations of American civil society, with a social influence so pervasive that Alexis de Tocqueville, in his deeply influential *Democracy in America*, wrote:

> Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it … I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. (de Tocqueville 1835/2003:295)

Further, as Max Weber re-affirmed in an essay based on his travels in the United States in the first years of the twentieth century, church membership was taken to be an important sign of social respectability and community membership. It had significant cultural meaning, as well as being key to social and economic networks and opportunities (Weber 1958). And, as is often reported in political polls and scholarly surveys, religion remains so important in American culture that many Americans report they would not vote for an atheist for President and they consider atheists significantly different from themselves (Edgell et al. 2006).

Thus, there is a long history of new immigrants to the U.S.A. finding religious institutions to be enormously useful in adapting to their new home. Some of this is about religious faith and the comfort, guidance, and inspiration that faith can provide. But in sociological terms, the functionality of religious involvement is much wider. As sociologists have shown in the past decade or so, immigrants find religious congregations a place to relax, find comfort among compatriots, and maintain extended family connections—at the same time as they learn how to succeed in American education, make important business or employment connections, and draw upon collective expertise in navigating their dealings with native-born Americans (for examples, see Warner and Wittner 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Leonard et al. 2005). Religious congregations are places where immigrants build 'social capital', learning civic skills while remaining connected to a cultural and religious community

that can diffuse and de-fuse the potential alienation that comes with such a move (see Foley and Hoge 2007). Thus, nurturing cultural and religious ties to their communities of origin is a vital process immigrants use in managing their simultaneous adaptation to new lives and a new society.

More recent research shows that religious organizations can have similar functions for the second generation as well, if in somewhat different ways. The second generation is usually more facile with English language than their parents, and understands American culture in many other ways as well. They are often surrounded by non-immigrant peers in school, on sports teams, even in their neighbourhoods, yet their parents' culture is also familiar, and their parents' faith is often one they admire. As a result, religious organizations, some of which the second-generation members themselves found and run, provide a vital link between their parents' immigrant culture and their American context (see Kim 2006; Min 2009; Warner and Williams 2010; Williams 2011).

The organizational form of the religious voluntary association and the cultural route of the subcultural reproduction but economic incorporation are available to immigrants due to America's historic cultural tolerance for religion and religious diversity. That tolerance may not be as expansive as national mythology holds, but one area in which Americans seem to tolerate and even promote differences is in religious expression. One of the reasons many immigrants become more involved with their religion in the U.S.A. as compared with their practice in their home countries is the legitimate place of religion in American civil society. Religious congregations are the most widespread and common form of organizational participation in American society—it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that one *becomes* 'American' through voluntary religious involvement.

Religion in American Public Life

I have argued thus far that there are two potentially contradictory streams in American culture regarding minority faith communities. On the one hand there is the cultural legitimacy of religion as a public identity in the U.S.A., while on the other hand there is

the social 'otherness' of minority identity and the assumption by many that the U.S.A. should be a 'Christian nation'. In the case of Islam these two forces have led to a situation in which many American Muslims have begun to consider their primary identity as 'Muslim' rather than Pakistani, 'Arab' or some other ethno-racial or national identity. This development is dictated, in part, by the identities imposed on immigrants by native-born members of U.S. society. Many Americans do not know much about the world and the differences between Arabs and South Asians are not clear to them. Further, the recent salience of Islam worldwide, and the cultural Islamophobia that has long been a minor strain in American culture, means that the category of 'Muslim' has reached wide-spread public consciousness and has become an easy way to label people. So it may not be surprising that Muslim religious identity would get primacy. And, of course, many Muslims are deeply committed to their faith and their religious identity is important to them. The concept of the *ummah* means that many Muslims themselves prize religious identity over national, racial, or ethnic labels.

Having a *religious* identity as a primary social identification has definite advantages in American society.[5] It is common for Americans to engage in public life through organizations of civil society, especially religious congregations. That is acceptable and deeply legitimate culturally. Further, constitutional and legal protections of religious freedom reinforce the rights to free association, and make religious organizations a valuable, even critical, organizational form in the institutional order. The tax structure yields advantages to religious institutions in organizing collective action. Many of the social functions and services provided by the developed welfare state in western and northern European countries are thought to be properly handled by religious groups in the U.S.A. Thus, for a relatively new minority to push its religious identity and organizations to the forefront is a wise move socially and politically.

[5] Pyong Gap Min (2009) shows that among many second-generation Korean Americans, their Evangelical Protestant religious identity becomes more important than their ethnic-cultural identification.

America's valuing of civil society and voluntary associations, and its lack of a developed welfare state, has implications for the tasks confronting religious organizations. The first task is, of course, the spiritual nurture and growth of congregants. But congregations, particularly for minority communities, often branch into providing services for community members. Childcare, language or job training classes, food banks, and emergency resources for families in distress are the types of services many congregations provide their members. It is for these reasons that new immigrants find religious organizations so socially useful as well as culturally important, as mentioned above (Williams 2007).

As communities and populations grow, and particularly in cases where education and economic success lead to some prosperity among a segment of community members, other organizations form to seek wider influence in public affairs. Such organizations are the substance of what Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2009) call 'organized Islam'— for example, the Council on American-Islamic Relations or the Muslim Public Affairs Council. These organizations advocate on behalf of American Muslims, representing the interests of the community in civic discourse, speaking to elected officials, and sponsoring programmes that interpret Islam and Muslims to the general public. More recently, other organizations such as the American Muslim Alliance have developed with the distinct agenda of increasing political influence through electing Muslim politicians to office. One can see a progression from service provision within the community, to representing group interests, to speaking to the public on issues of particular importance to the Muslim community. This is a progression not unlike that experienced by other ethnic and religious groups in the U.S.A. At some point, one might expect American Muslim organizations to speak *for* the public rather than just *to* the public; that is, they may begin articulating a view of the public good on issues beyond those narrowly concerned with their own people. In this regard, the open nature of American civil society and the prominent place of religious institutions within it are specific resources for new immigrants generally and American Muslims specifically.

The Particularity of the American Case

Both the Nordic countries and the U.S.A. are developed post-industrial societies with traditions of political democracy and civil liberties that make them attractive to immigrants; concomitantly, abetted by legal orders and cultural norms that protect and value social diversity, they are also places where newcomers can thrive. But there are significant differences between the U.S.A. and Nordic countries that have in turn shaped social responses to immigrants and the immigrants' trajectories of adaptation.

The first is that the U.S.A. is a very large country with a dramatically diverse population. Its history since its founding as a haven for immigrants from many parts of the world, along with regional variations in settlement patterns, have sometimes worked to diffuse immigrant populations and de-fuse anti-immigrant hostility. Combining with the social reality of immigration and diversity is the salient national mythology of the U.S.A. as a 'nation of immigrants'. As noted above, the national story may paint American history as more accepting than it has been, but there is a decided history there, that even those wary about current immigration levels feel they must acknowledge and honor. Similarly, even though Christianity has been the *de facto* established faith in American society since the founding, both the legal protections for religious freedom and the cultural value placed on that freedom give those in other faiths a way to claim fidelity with American traditions. That the nation has not always lived up to its ideals does not mean that Americans cannot use those very ideals to call the current reality to account. Immigrants have powerful cultural claims on American identity, which has helped facilitate the incorporation of millions of migrants within the country.

A second feature of the U.S.A. that has shaped immigrant adaptation and incorporation is American cultural individualism. This individualism has done much to prevent a state-based welfare system from developing as a truly equitable social safety net—Americans are supposed to provide for themselves and are wary of governmental power. There is also a cultural presumption that people can—and should—remake themselves according to their own consciences. Voluntary commitments are valued,

even in religion it is the freely chosen religious identity that is viewed as authentic; the idea that one must be 'born again' to be truly committed is deeply anchored in American religious and political culture. The notion that America represents a 'new world', liberated from the strictures of the old, has given many immigrants the opportunities to forge new, hybrid identities. The American mythology of the western frontier is similarly about starting over and making a new life. This cultural theme has also produced among Americans some sense of obligation to accept such new identities among others who are striving to form new lives. The narrative of re-making oneself does put pressure on immigrants to assimilate, but it also pushes the native-born to accept newcomers.

Importantly, this is often understood as a primarily individual process. Just as the American legal system instantiates and protects individual rather than collective rights, the trajectory through life is understood to be a matter of individual ability and will. A staple of American literature and film is the person overly constrained by societal norms, laws, or expectations from which they fight to free themselves (as opposed to mobilizing a collective action). 'I did it my way' is an iconic American sentiment.

For immigrants—even those such as Muslims that meet with nativist suspicion—this individualism does provide a pathway around prejudice or social obstacles. It is neither complete nor equally open to all individuals in any given immigrant group. But many immigrants can forge culturally hybrid identities, emphasize their individual characteristics and attributes, and claim to be fully American. That they can do this while also claiming a minority religious faith and being involved in a vibrant congregation is the combination of contexts that has facilitated the incorporation and acceptance of many immigrants in American history, including contemporary Muslims.

Conclusion

I have painted a basically optimistic view of Islam in the U.S.A. I have offered an argument as to why the arrival and incorporation of Muslims into American life continues to progress—despite nativist fears, political suspicion, and a stratified racial

order. There is the risk of this seeming too idyllic. The U.S.A. has tremendous levels of economic inequality and poverty that it seems relatively unwilling to do anything about, and that would be unacceptable in most advanced, post-industrial societies. That Americans must rely more heavily on the voluntary associations of civil society than the welfare state to deal with this has meant that religious institutions remain important in society, but has not effectively addressed basic inequality. Racism, xenophobic attitudes, and an often inchoate Christian nationalism have led to external wars and internal hate crimes. Nonetheless, I am arguing that a de-centralized and privatized civil society, and a widespread cultural individualism, have decreased some of the points of tension and conflict between immigrants and native-born Americans over resources and often opened avenues into full social citizenship. It has moreover helped to keep religion vibrant in American life—as a valued cultural domain, a source of important social and economic resources, and a central part of American national mythology. Whatever the current prejudice against and the travails of American Muslims, I see no reason that these dynamics will not eventually result in their fuller incorporation into the U.S. social and religious mosaic.

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